

REMOTE ESOL CASE STUDY: Independent and Peer Learning

Literacy Pittsburgh Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania



ESOL Program: English Language Learning and Family Literacy

Website: www.literacypittsburgh.org

Reach: Urban/Suburban

Number of ESOL students served per year: 1,484

Student population:

Immigrants and refugees, most of whom speak Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, French, Kiswahili, Nepali, Portuguese, Russian or Spanish

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“Better lives through learning. Literacy Pittsburgh believes that all people deserve the opportunity to learn in a place where their strengths are celebrated; and, as a leader, they embrace the responsibility to innovate, model best practices, and grow.”²

Program Description

Founded as an all-volunteer organization in the late 1970s by Mary Yardumian, who taught students to read at her kitchen table, Literacy Pittsburgh (formerly Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council) has been recognized as a national leader in adult and family literacy since its incorporation in 1982. Literacy Pittsburgh has earned state and national awards for the strength of its programs and administrative oversight; and is the largest provider of adult basic education in Allegheny and Beaver Counties. Last year, nearly 5,000 people were served by Literacy Pittsburgh’s programs. Over the years, offerings have expanded to meet the community’s broader learning needs — from GED preparation to English Language learning to digital literacy and workplace skills. In Allegheny County alone, there are about 54,000 adults who either don’t have a high school credential or don’t have the adequate English language skills³. Classroom, small-group, and one-to-one instruction are offered free of charge. A stable staff of nearly 50 with extensive training and experience in adult education and ESOL, supported by nearly 500 volunteer tutors, creates an outstanding learning environment for students, grounded in best practices, innovation, and continuous program improvement.

Notable, Innovative Practices

In response to the pandemic, Literacy Pittsburgh created two YouTube channels to support remote learning: [Literacy Pittsburgh English Class](#) and [Family Literacy Storytime](#). The channels contain instructional videos accessible to students on a familiar and free platform that is accessible from any device and with low literacy skills. The videos can be used as part of synchronous online, hybrid, or face-to-face class or independently, as a supplement for students to practice English language and citizenship skills. Literacy Pittsburgh also developed an optional “class with no teacher,” where learners meet with peers to practice English and maintain community at a distance. This has been a popular offering, allowing learners to socialize, share information, get advice and offer mutual support.

The Digital Literacy Fellow is a new staff position responsible for increasing technology use across the agency and making sure the organization and the staff are up to date on the different resources available to support teaching and learning at a distance.

Remote ESOL Program Design

“YouTube channels give learners the freedom to choose what they want to learn and when they want to learn.”

—Nicole Mannino Johnson, Special Projects Manager

In response to the COVID pandemic, teachers brainstormed ways to remain connected and provide support and educational programming to their students. Remembering that their learners like videos and frequently use YouTube to access information, they decided to try it as

a content-delivery tool. Using a projector and their cellphones, they started to record short videos, upload them to YouTube, and share them with their learners. After recruiting other teachers to make more videos, they quickly had [a collection of videos on YouTube to support distance learning](#). This adaptation to the challenges brought by the pandemic took place even before they started using Zoom for instruction.

Students responded immediately to the YouTube videos. The platform is free and starts playing on any device, whether it is a phone, a tablet, a Chromebook, or a laptop. Another convenient feature is that it requires minimal digital literacy skills. In the family literacy classes, the videos proved useful, helping parents to teach relevant content to their children, especially while the stay-at-home order was in place. The videos also added flexibility to accommodate the needs of adult learners. Even if they cannot attend the Zoom class, they can still use the videos and watch them when it is convenient for their families: at breakfast, at bedtime, or during family time.

Although replicating peer learning in a classroom setting is hard in the virtual world, Literacy Pittsburgh was not ready to ignore that important part of learning. To incentivize connection and peer-to-peer learning, the program implemented synchronous online classes with no teacher. In these classes, learners meet to share information, learn from one another, practice conversation skills, and offer mutual support.

Student Onboarding & Persistence Supports

Currently, onboarding is completed virtually to comply with COVID-19 regulations. Literacy Pittsburgh staff onboard students by contacting them via phone or email. The staff helps learners access an online orientation module on [Thinkific](#), a cloud-based learning management system. If learners are not able to navigate the online orientation independently, Literacy Pittsburgh offers sessions via Zoom. During orientation, students complete paperwork and testing. All the organization's orientation forms are on [JotForm](#), an online form-builder that integrates with its data system. If learners are using mobile devices, they often need to share documents via [PandaDoc](#), a user-friendly method of sharing forms for signature.

Once learners have completed orientation, they are connected with a coordinator, who places each student in an English, Citizenship, or College and Career Readiness class or with a one-on-one tutor. If students are job seekers, they are connected with the Career Transitions team. Students meet one-on-one with the transitions manager, who helps them explore career opportunities and identify next steps.

Literacy Pittsburgh has employed a flexible strategy by using and adapting various tools to support enrollment and orientation for learners with diverse devices and connectivity needs, and to accommodate multiple digital fluency levels. By partnering with agencies in the community that can connect learners to wraparound services in a timely way, the program has been able to support learners with needs beyond accessing the virtual class.

Instruction

“The videos are not exactly a replication of what we did in class before, but an opportunity to review, get practice with pronunciation, and develop other skills.”

—Nicole Mannino Johnson, Special Projects Manager

Students meet in live Zoom classes; before or after class, the instructor sends each student a link for a specific video to watch, which follows up on what was done in class. Within the video, the teachers who created them ask students to practice speaking, listening, reading, or writing. The students will do the activities proposed and text or WhatsApp the instructors the questions, recordings with answers, or images of written exercises. They have never encountered the need for a teacher to guide a learner on how to use YouTube videos. Just by sending a specific link for a particular video that a teacher wants students to watch on that day, with the content the teacher wants them to practice, is enough.

In the post-pandemic world, videos will continue to be a handy tool for learners to practice outside of the classroom, allowing them to review if they miss a session or get more practice if they feel the need. Currently, Literacy Pittsburgh is producing around one to two videos a week for its ESOL classes. Teachers send the videos ahead of time for learners to get familiar with and preview what will be covered in class that week. They then use the Zoom session to review, see what students have retained, practice applying words and concepts, etc. Additionally, the channels now have playlists organized by level and sometimes by teacher, so, depending on the learners' levels, teachers can customize content and borrow content from different playlists as needed by the class or to support specific learner needs.

Digital Learning Supports

Literacy Pittsburgh secured a grant from BNY Mellon Foundation that paid for Chromebooks, which allowed them to launch a tech lending library to ensure students in need of devices could successfully learn remotely. Literacy Pittsburgh then worked through partners to secure internet connectivity for their learners. Through the Carnegie Libraries of Pittsburgh and Immigrant Services and Connections (ISAC) agency, they were able to help learners get Comcast essentials and hotspots. The hotspots could be kept until the end of the school year, which has now been extended until the end of summer 2021. Support from other partners also quickly came in, with other library systems asking how they could support learners and offering additional hotspots for any students that needed them. The Whitehall Public Library and the Baldwin Public Library also provided hotspots.

Beyond connectivity and devices, Literacy Pittsburgh also worked to ensure teachers implicitly or explicitly teach and develop students' digital literacy skills within their class. One teacher worked with a group of advanced learners over Zoom to create a podcast. In the family literacy program, explicit digital literacy instruction is specifically geared to help students navigate issues with their children's school and support their children's virtual learning. Some examples of practical digital literacy skills that have been covered include learning how to add an attachment in an email or send a basic email to their children's teachers.

Support for Students' Basic Needs

Partnerships have been instrumental in ensuring learners' access to resources in the community. Many of these partnerships existed before the pandemic, but during the pandemic, those partnerships became critical. Literacy Pittsburgh supports immigrants and refugees through a partnership with [Immigrant Services and Connections](#), a cross-agency partnership that connects clients to a full range of community services and offers bilingual navigation. In addition, the [Career Accelerator Program](#) through the Jewish Family and Community Services (JFCS) has brought career assistance into Literacy Pittsburgh's classes. This fast-paced class helps students get a GED (General Educational Development diploma) very quickly, while offering career exploration and guidance to either continue to postsecondary education or apply for jobs. Literacy Pittsburgh and JFCS also offer the Immigrant Workforce Program, which assists students

interested in careers in health care to work on the language and job skills they need to enter the field. Literacy Pittsburgh considers this offering a big help for learners seeking to secure jobs.

Support for Teachers and Staff

Prior to the beginning of the pandemic, a new position was created to ensure teachers, staff, and the organization are prepared for the digital literacy challenges that the pandemic made even more evident. The Digital Literacy Fellow is responsible for increasing technology use across the agency and making sure the organization and the staff are up to date on the different resources available to support teaching and learning at a distance. The Digital Literacy Fellow shares knowledge and supports the exploration of new technology tools to improve instruction at a distance and infuse more digital literacy practice into existing classes.

There are both required trainings as well as voluntary professional development opportunities through the agency organized by the Digital Literacy Fellow. Professional development options include peer exploration and elective coaching. The [Teaching the Skills That Matter](#) framework and lesson plan toolkit are shared with the teachers as one of many approaches.

Sometimes the sessions are fluid conversations about things teachers would like to do in class or questions they have about specific tools. In this case, teachers receive suggestions and opportunities to explore tools that could help them address their concerns. In other instances, coaching is customized to cover specific topics, such as how to best utilize breakout rooms and other features in Zoom or how to go about teaching a word-processing application in tandem with English language skills. The Digital Literacy Fellow also offers a variety of workshops for volunteer teachers, where they [learn and practice using different tools](#) to support remote teaching and make it more interactive and effective.

Leadership

“We didn’t want to let our students down.”

–Caitlin Griffiths, Director of Child and Family Programs


Teachers were the first responders. They called students every day during the first weeks of the pandemic, making sure they had what they needed, ensuring connections to support services were being made. Teachers drove to people’s houses to deliver Chromebooks, and as teachers learned of students losing their jobs and not qualifying for food assistance, they picked up foods from the local food pantry and delivered the goods to students’ homes. They delivered supplies to students, including masks, gloves, and other items students couldn’t get any other way. The YouTube project was also born from the teachers’ commitment to not letting their students down. They recorded their first YouTube videos as the school was shutting down because of the pandemic, recruited other teachers, and improved their equipment and skills to create better quality videos that could support their students’ needs. Teachers were empowered to take risks, but most importantly, they shared common values.

Indicators of Effectiveness

Although validation of the effectiveness of the YouTube channels is needed, the channels had 272,000 views and 2,000 subscribers as of March, 2021. According to learners themselves, the channels are effective, with many reporting passing scores and accomplishing their learning goals.

← Comments

Comments on "Citizenship N400 Sample Interview: Before the Interview, Eligibility and Putting under Oath"



Highlighted comment

Cing S Huai 2 weeks ago
Thank you teacher Nicole, I love the way you teach, It's help me to understand and easy to remember.

👍 👎 ❤️ REPLY

carmen alcaraz 1 month ago
Hi teacher Nicole I loved your videos, I have my interview next month please share more information about interviews, thanks God bless you 😊

👍 👎 ❤️ REPLY


Abdi Mahdi 2 months ago
Hi teacher Nicole I passed my interview yesterday Thank you so much for your help.

👍 👎 ❤️ REPLY

View reply from Literacy Pittsburgh English Class

← Comments

Comments on "Citizenship interview words and questions: N400 Part 12: 45-50 Attachment to the Constitution"



Highlighted comment

Sabitra Bista 5 days ago
Thank you so much your citizenship video's help me a lot I passed 😊

👍 👎 ❤️ REPLY

View 2 replies from Literacy Pittsburgh English Class and ot

Bhushan Prabha 5 months ago
Your videos very useful 🙌 😊

👍 1 👎 ❤️ REPLY

Comments from Students on the Citizenship Instructional Videos

² <https://www.literacypittsburgh.org/mission/>

³ <https://pittsburgh.cbslocal.com/2020/09/02/literacy-pittsburgh-in-need-of-volunteers-for-adult-education-programs/>



ABOUT THE REMOTE ADULT ESOL PROJECT

This case study is part of the Remote Adult ESOL¹ (English for Speakers of Other Languages) Project led by World Education, Inc. The project's goal is to document and disseminate viable remote adult ESOL program models and practices so that ESOL instruction can be done at scale efficiently and effectively in a variety of settings. The impetus for the project was to identify strategies for meeting the current interest and unmet demand as well as meeting potential demand prompted by English language requirements for U.S. citizenship under immigration reform. During winter and spring of 2021, the project investigated selected ESOL programs' and learners' needs, experiences, and promising instructional and learner support practices that rely predominantly on technology-rich strategies and tools deployed remotely.

This case study is one of eight full program profiles selected for its innovative program design and promising practices. The eight case studies of programs from across the U.S. are complemented by:

- *Policy and Practice Brief* that presents policy considerations and recommendations;
- *Creating Equitable Access to Remote ESOL and Supports in Multiple Contexts and for Distinct Populations and Purposes*, a cross-case analysis of remote adult ESOL delivery through the lens of the varied organizational settings in which they operate and the supports needed to engage distinct ESOL populations; and
- *Promising Remote ESOL Practices*, a document that highlights specific practices and innovations of selected, nominated programs from onboarding to instruction, digital skills development, and student and teacher supports.

¹ We use the term English for Speakers of Other Languages or ESOL rather than English as a Second Language (ESL) out of recognition that many English Learners already speak more than one language, just not English.